E-CONSUMER CONFORMITY AND ITS IMPACT ON THE BRAND ENGAGEMENT

A synopsis

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SECTION 1

1.1 INTRODUCTION

Internet makes consumers around the globe to interact with each other and this interaction is increasing as the days are passing. The development of virtual communities like facebook, instagram, whatsapp, twitter, blogs etc. over the internet has increased the interaction among the global consumers. This interaction of consumers is the result of information technology revolution all around the globe from past decades. As of June 2018, 55.1% of the world's population has internet access (Internet World Stats, 2018). This era of networking over the globe makes the consumers open to take their decisions by analysing and studying the list of available enormous options. In consumer context, Internet has provided social media platform as an interaction tool where consumers can easily interact through virtual communities like facebook, instagram, whatsapp, twitter, blogs etc. Consumer behaviour can easily understand through the interactions on virtual communities (Park and Feinberg, 2010).

Virtual communities act as a platform over the internet where consumers attach emotionally and show the connections and belongingness with social media like facebook, instagram, whatsapp, twitter, blogs etc. The consumers start feeling attached with the groups by such sharing of information and interaction among each other and start to follow each other. This sort of behaviour leads to conformity among consumers. Consumers with in a group which are centrally dominant influence other members because their social prominence commands conformity from other members (Chatterjee, P. *et al.*, 2017). Conformity occurs when an individual is influenced by society to alter their attitudes, beliefs, or actions to abide by their existing norms within the group. In online interaction, this conformity behaviour seems to affect the decision of consumers. Such Conformity behaviour of consumers through online virtual communities is termed as e-Consumer Conformity.

This online conformity behaviour of consumers has attracted the thought of many marketers to use this social media platform to enhance the sales by engaging the customers and attract them toward their

brands. Walsh (2004) has given these five motives which are major reason of interaction of consumers over the virtual community; i.e., gathering information regarding products or services, socially comparing how others' opinions measure up to their own opinion, community belongingness, the possibility of monetary reward or simply learning how certain products function. Consumers are highly influenced by such conformity during communicating with each other on these virtual communities. In order to attract the customers, the companies are trying to engage them with their brands by using different mediums such as by a reaction, interaction, and effect or customer experience. These are connections which help the companies to engage their customers with their brands. Every company of the market tries to establish a good relationship between its consumers and brands in which the company deals with.

Consumers which have higher participation in groups of virtual communities are more inclined to influence of peers over the virtual communities (Tussyadiah *et. al.*, 2015). The engagement of consumers over the communities influences by Conformity behaviour of consumers. This emotional attachment of consumers results into engaging the consumers with brands to share their belongings, ideas and thoughts over the virtual communities. Consumer Brand engagement is about emotional attachment that a consumer experience during the repeated and on-going interactions among each other regarding specific brands of their interests. Consumers discuss their opinion about the brands within groups over the virtual platforms of social media and such discussions create excitement within peers of group. This excitement of consumers towards the brands leads to consumer brand engagement. When these discussions start influencing the consumers over the communities then they get engaged with these compliances. The engagement of consumers for the brands presented in the market on the groups leads due to Conformity behaviour among the reference groups.

Consumer Brand Engagement is a sub-form of Customer Engagement. Consumer Brand Engagement concept addresses specific interaction between a focal consumer and a particular brand (Hollebeek, 2011). Individuals are motivated to engage in group favouring behaviour to improve their social identity. According to Hollebeek, 2011; Consumer Brand Engagement is the level of an individual customer's

motivational, brand-related & context-dependent state of mind that is characterized by specific levels of cognitive, emotional & behavioural activity in brand interactions. Consumer Brand Engagement is also very diverse concept in its own. In last researches related to Consumer Brand Engagement, researchers have tried to measure the depth of well from different convenient scales.

In this study, researcher is linking the E-Consumer Conformity and Consumer Brand Engagement to study the influence of E-Consumer Conformity on Consumer Brand Engagement over the virtual communities. Park and Feinberg (2010) emphasize the researchers to study the E-Consumer conformity to give more light on online version of consumer conformity behaviour. After introduction of virtual network, Conformity behaviour has emerged on nascent platform of virtual communities where interaction among global consumers becomes easy and convenient. The researches in the field of consumer conformity are also very limited in Indian context. The conformity behaviour of consumers is all about influence of peers of the group on the decision of the consumers. Hence, researcher gets hint from literature to study this behaviour of consumer conformity over the groups on virtual communities on the consumers brand engagement. In order to carry the research further, the Apparel sector has been selected by the researcher in Textile and Apparel Industry.

SECTION 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

The growth of Internet over the past decades results into emergence of social network that leads to virtual communities as a major medium of communication for the customers into the markets (Dabran and Li, 2012). Virtual communities, blogs and online social networking sites have provided a platform to influence consumers' purchase decisions (OTX research, 2008). Online (virtual) communities have the potential to reshape the nature and scope of how consumers learn about, understand, form opinion about, and process information of products and services for their decision making (Park and Feinberg, 2010). Virtual Communities include facebook, instagram, whatsapp, twitter, blogs etc.

Consumer Brand engagement and E-Consumer Conformity are positively related with each other in social networking sites (Tussyadiah *et. al.*, 2015). Consumer Brand Engagement and Susceptibility to social influences in social networking sites influence it socially over the Internet. Over the virtual conformity, consumers are accumulated at a single platform to interact and influence each other through their different choices. Retailers and Manufacturers have realized the importance of these virtual communities and conformity behaviour of these consumers over the virtual communities has emerged as a value addition tool which can easily affect and influence the sales and promotion of products among the customers. So now, it becomes very important for the business to monitor this conformity behaviour of customer in order to get advantage in the market. (Park and Feinberg, 2010). This monitoring by business people helps them to develop and follow the desired engagement strategies to engage the consumers with respective brands. The interaction among consumers always leads to an effect on the final purchasing decisions of consumers; these purchase decisions of consumers is responsible of engagement of consumers for their interested brands and products.

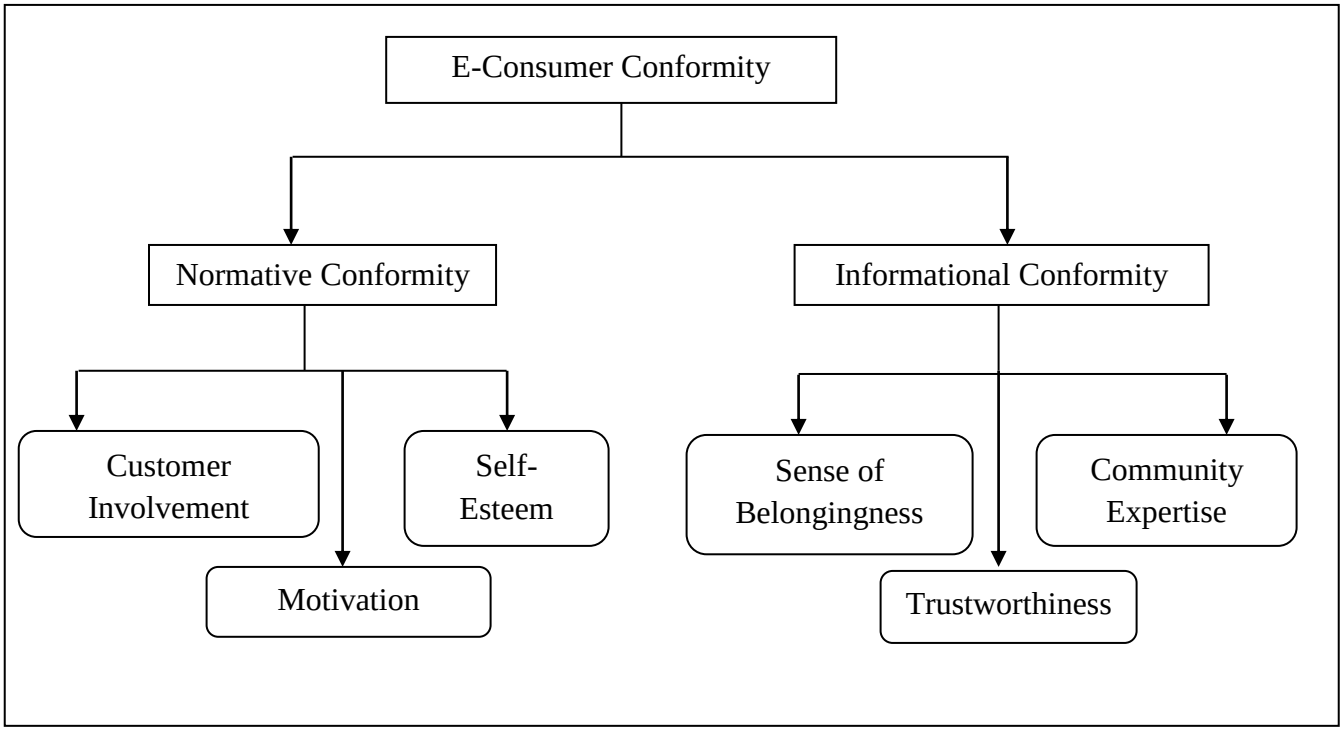
There are many variable presented by literature review which plays a very significant role to determine a relationship between E-Consumer Conformity and Consumer Brand Engagement.

2.1 E-Consumer Conformity

Social psychologist Asch's experiment in 1953 was the first experiment, where conformity behaviour has been studied practically among the group at a wide level. He proposed that there is existence of conformity behaviour among an individual due to groups in society to which he belongs. After this experiment, conformity has emerged as Social Paradigm to measure the group behaviour in social influence. Individual's sensitivity to group conformity is a mediator for relationship between commitment to social network online community and information seeking behaviour at the communities (Park and Cho, 2012). Mcleod (2007) said that Conformity is all about influence of majority in Society. Conformity is a social impact relevant with change in behaviour that influences consumers to act according to

traditional society. Conformity act as a moderator on attitude and mind set regarding apparels brands (Ahmed et. al., 2013). Individual with strong inclination toward Conformity shows strong effect on booking intention in Hotels because of positive reviews. Hence, for conformists positive reviews shows more effect than the negative reviews in enhancing the booking intention. (Tsao, 2015).

Figure 1: Hierarchy of Components of E-Consumer Conformity



Source: Author's Compilation

Consumer Conformity is defined as a change in beliefs or actions due to real or perceived group pressures (Blackwell *et. al.*, 2006). Chung and Pysarchik (2000) put that cultural pressure and group conformity influence the attitude of Korean Customers about the domestic products while there is less influence for foreign products. While in china, group conformity directs the impact regarding the purchase intentions of US apparels (Jin and Kang 2011). In Indian context, it was found that social norms and group conformity does not have direct impact on behavioural intentions of Indian Consumers (Son, 2013).

Consumer conformity is also defined as compliance with group norms, susceptibility to group influence and behavioural changes in consumption behaviour due to a reference group (Burnkrant and Cousineau,

1975; Bousch *et. al.* 1993; Lascu and Zinkhan, 1999). The Internet provides a virtual platform to social interaction (Park and Feinberg, 2010). The effect of social interaction with consumers and influence their buying decisions is proposed as E-Consumer Conformity. The concept of E-Consumer Conformity studies under the domain of social influence. E-Consumer Conformity has been divided into two dimensions of social influences: Normative Consumer Conformity and Informative Consumer Conformity (Deutsch, 1955; Burnkrant and Cousineau, 1975). These dimensions can be explained as:

2.1.1 Normative Consumer Conformity

Normative consumer conformity is a concern with behavioral conformation in accordance with the perceived expectations of other consumers of the group (Park and Feinberg, 2010). It reflects the individual's desire to conform to social group pressure or norms in expectation of rewards and avoid punishments (Bearden, *et. al.,* 1989; Kropp *et. al.* 2005). Normative influence is utiliterian and value expressive in nature. Subjective norms represents a person's perception of whether significant referents approve or disapprove of a behavior. Normative Conformity has a negetive relationship with the values that an individual have, i.e., the individual with stronger values is less effective with normative conformity while weaker personal value leads to higher effect of normative conformity. The culture of collectivism shows high degee of susceptibily to normative influence (Ebren, 2009).

Normative influence has more impact on purchase decisions of apparel consumers (Khare *et. al.,* 2011). In this online social networking era, the consumers are showing conformity behaviour on a large scale because of normative concerns to global standards or can say to the trends and perceived value of consumption to symbolise global status (Tussyadiah *et. al.,* 2015). Normative conformance involves flow with expectations of others, by managing self-concept, and, developing and managing relationship (Cialdini and Trost, 1998). Hence, Normative Confomrity is responsible for changing the temporary and permanent behaviours of individuals and then an individual starts acting like them.

There are three variables which affects Normative Conformity. These are Customer Involvement, Conformity Motivation and Self-esteem.

2.1.1.1 Customer Involvement

Customer involvement is a construct in the determination of conformity behaviour. High involvement leads to high risk in decision making which results into increase in normative conformity behaviour (R. P. Grossman, 1999; R. E. Witt, 1970). The degree of intensity and interest of consumers regarding different products and services is termed as customer involvement. Customer Involvement in a product can be increased through the participation of these customers in reward mechanisms and communicating peer to peer with the other virtual communities' managers (Chen *et. al.*, 2013).

Customer Involvement plays a very important role for strengthening the emotional bond in order to enhance the moral responsibility and shared culture among the customers to which Muniz and O' Guinn (2001) termed as we-ness. Customers with high involvement in virtual communities have changed the choices of youths easily towards the apparels (Cho, 2012).

2.1.1.2 Self Esteem

Self-esteem is one of the psychological conditions found to determine susceptibility to conformity influence. Self-esteem is related to confidence (Park and Feinberg, 2010). Self-Esteem has a negative relationship with normative consumer conformity (Mandhachitara, 2008). It means self-esteem adversely effects community conformity, individuals having high self-esteem shows no impact on their group norms in result of that they do not change their purchase decisions because of conformity.

The consumers which are seeking for pride in society take purchase decisions related to purchasing of foreign garments for satisfying their self-esteem. The negative relationship between self-esteem and normative consumer conformity leads to increase in level of social anxiety (Glasshouwer et. al., 2013; van Tuijl, 2014). Close friends of individuals' influence them to follow each other and this influence is

induced by self-esteem of each member interacting with one another over the social media (Stephen, 2013). Virtual Communities like Facebook brought changes the way in which individuals have present their image among their peer groups; the individuals having higher self-esteem is being preferred by individuals to get interact with over the social media and being obliged them as close friends (Gonzales and Hancock, 2011).

2.1.1.3 Conformity Motivation

Conformity Motivation is the tendency of consumers to flow through the views of referent groups, i.e., virtual communities like facebook, instagram, whatsapp, twitter, blogs etc. (Park and Feinberg, 2010). Higher level of motivation to conform to group norms leads to higher normative conformity which ultimately reflects in consumers' attitude toward purchasing while Conformity Motivation and Self-esteem are negatively related with each other. (Khandelwal *et. al*., 2018; Park and Feinberg, 2010). Now if we talk about the fashion involvement of women, self-construct is positively related with attention to social comparison which ultimately affect the women's motivation to the conform (Piamphongsant, 2008).

2.1.2 Informational Conformity

Informational consumer conformity is conformance with purchase beliefs and decisions of other group members because of information received from them in the form of their knowledge and expertise (Park and Feinberg, 2010). Informational Consumer Conformity is defined as an influence to accept information obtained from another as evidence about reality (Deutsch, 1955). Perceived Sense of Belongingness, Trustworthiness and Community Expertise are the variables which have an impact on Informational Conformity (Khandelwal *et. al.*, 2018).

Internet has provided a new platform to users for sharing information and interaction that give place to a new form of conformance due to interaction between global consumers. The knowledge and expertise of

customers enhance the informational consumer conformity with the help of their purchase belief and decisions. Every customer always tries to be accurate and correct in their decision making by informative conformation. (Park and Feinberg, 2010).

Online virtual communities provide a constant platform for their users to share information, exchange opinions and recommendations and display certain consumption behaviour. In this business world, information sharing nature of consumers and accepting the recommendations of groups over the virtual communities help a consumer in decision making. (Tussyadiah *et. al.*, 2015). In decision making about purchase of products and services, a consumer is more rely on information provides by other consumers instead of the promises and sharing provide by companies by different mediums (Litvin *et. al.*, 2008; Ong, 2012; Pantelidis, 2010) and find the information provided by other consumers more trustworthy instead of persuasive messages of companies (Feick and Price, 1987). Purchase behaviour and Informational conformity are associated with each other (Burnkrant and Cousineau, 1975) and Informational conformity has an impact on perceived trustworthiness (Park and Feinberg, 2010).

2.1.2.1 Sense of Belongingness

Virtual Communities provide emotional connections and belongingness to their members, this shows that an interpersonal influence exists within members. A sense of belongingness to a group creates a more cohesive environment (Kim *et. al.*, 2004); those groups having low sense of belongingness shows no trust or less among each other (Witt, 1969; Alvaro and Crano, 1997). Sense of Belongingness has an impact on informational consumer conformity and is also share the positive relationship with trustworthiness of consumers (Park and Feinberg, 2010; Bo-lin, 2006). The interaction and sharing information creates trust which promotes sense of belongingness that leads to conformance.

Socialization and interaction with each other through virtual communities builds up the sense of belongingness among group memebers (Jaura and Michailova, 2014). Laroche *et. al.* (2012) pointed out that people like the idea of contributing, creating, and joining communities to fulfill needs of

belongingness, being socially connected and recognized or simply enjoying interactions with other like-minded members. The social related factors like sense of belongingness explains variables like committment very well (Cheung and Lee, 2009). Purchase behaviour of customers are influenced by motives which consumers have. Among two motives, Affective motived purchases are affected by social belongingness, ego gratification and self-expression needs (Richardson, 1999).

2.1.2.2 Trustworthiness

Trust encourage members to share and corporate with each other by promoting interaction among members in virtual environment. Dynamic and interactive e-Word of Mouth has become possible over the social media due to the trust that customers have within each other under multidirection virtual society (Chu & Kim, 2011). When opinion sources lack consistency, the uncertainty of consumers increases, which under-mines the stability of their attitudes. This results into lossing the trust of consumers. Customer perform different roles in spreading the information over this multidirectional world of internet. While making purchase decisions consumers adopt the social media communication and contact the people which seems trustworthy and then pass information on which they rely confidently. This is the way of consumers to maintain the social relationship over the internet and allow their networks to flow the information. (Tussyadiah *et. al.*, 2015).

Like all relationships, customer relationships are highly based on trust of people because it allows the free flow of information (Boush *et. al.*, 1993). Companies are getting opportunities and engaging, actively involving and interactng for strengthening the network with loyal customers and buliding the active relationships with potentials by wining their trust of customers using virtual platform (Mersey *et. al.*, 2010). Virtual Community thus become source of trusted product evaluation for many members. Now companies are also try to find the creative ways to tap the power of the trusted social community (Baird and Parasnis, 2011). High degree of personal taste and subjectivity to users influence the trust in purchase decision of buyers from social media websites (Silverman, 2001).

2.1.2.3 Community Expertise

The perceived expertise of a virtual community is a vital component to decide that a consumer would adhere to the group norms in terms of informational conformity or not. Perceived Expertise of Community member affects the tendency of consumers to hold the group norms. The more experts are present in the virtual communities the more consumers comply with the group norms. (Burnkrant and Cousineau, 1975). When an individual knows that a virtual community is a composition of adequate level of expertise of a specific area then they comply strongly with group norms and then behave accordingly. Information Consumer Conformity is affected by perceived level of expertise up to a great extent. While Customer attitude is largely influence by other Normative expectation rather than Knowledge and expertise of the group members. (Khandelwal *et. al.*, 2018).

2.2 Brand Engagement

The theory of customer management argues about the enagagement that when a relationship is satisfying and has emotional connectedness, the partners become engaged in their concern for each other. Different firms in the market which are engaged in any sort of business according to nature of the firm, type of industry, value of the brand and level of involvement moderate the link between satisfaction and direct contributiion, and between emotions and indirect contribution of Customer engagement. (Pansari and Kumar, 2017). 'Engagement' has been viewed as a promising concept expected to provide enhanced predictive and explanatory power of focal consumer behavior outcomes, including brand loyalty (Pham and Avnet 2009; Avnet and Higgins 2006a/b; Schau *et. al.*. 2009). Every organisation is seeking for such customers which are interested for participation and can have engagement for their brands. Brand Engagement is defined as 'the level of a customer's cognitive, emotional and behavioral investment in specific brand interactions' (Hollebeek, 2011). Customers may thus devote relevant cognitive, emotional and/or physical resources based on their perceived value levels obtained from specific brand interactions (Higgins and Scholer, 2009). In online communities, customers engage with other individuals and with

brands in social network platforms. Cognition, affect and behaviours are three key engagement dimensions. (Dessart *et. al*, 2015). According to social exchange theory (SET), customers are predicted to reciprocate positive thoughts, feelings and behaviors toward an object (e.g. a brand) upon receiving specific benefits from the brand relationship (Pervan, Bove, & Johnson, 2009).

Sprott, Czellar, and Spangenberg (2009) discussed a general measure for brand engagement. They define brand engagement as ‘‘an individual difference representing consumers’ propensity to include important brands as part of how they view themselves’’. The rational mediators such as satisfaction, commitment, trust and involvement makes an important theory-based contribution to the literature on relationship marketing by explaining the customer-brand engagement process (Bowden, 2009). Brand Engagement has been viewed to represent a key new metric for gauging brand performance (Kumar *et al.* 2010; Bowden 2009). Brand Engagement can be conceptualize as a consumer’s positively valenced brand-related cognitive, emotional and behavioral activity during or related to focal consumer/brand interactions. Brand Engagement can be conceptualize as a consumer’s positively valenced brand-related cognitive, emotional and behavioral activity during or related to focal consumer/brand interactions. Consumer Brand Engagement studies under the following themes:

2.2.1 Immersion - Immersion is defined as ‘a customer’s level of brand-related concentration in particular brand interactions’, and as such, reveals the extent of individuals’ cognitive investment in specific brand interactions (Hollebeek, 2011).

2.2.2 Passion - Passion was defined as ‘the degree of a customer’s positive brand-related affect in particular brand interactions’, and as such, reveals the extent of individuals’ emotional investment in specific brand interactions (Hollebeek, 2011).

2.2.3 Activation - Activation was defined as ‘a customer’s level of energy, effort and/or time spent on a brand in particular brand interactions’ (Hollebeek, 2011).

2.3 Problem Statement

The concept of consumer conformity is nascent on online platform. The decision making of consumer is highly dependent on the behaviour of respective consumers. The rise of internet over the past decades has attracted marketers as well as consumers to be a part of new and easily accessible platform for their requirements. The population all over the globe have found internet as a platform to share, interact, organize and get engaged with their interests all around the globe. The consumers all around the globe have assessiblity of internet and communicate with each other frequently. Consumers of Internet platform are using the virtual communities, blogs and social networks for the communication. Among them, Virtual Communities have the potenial for making the consumers to understand, develop the learning nature and give the information for making decisions about products and services. These decisions give the direction to consumer to act on the concerned conformity behaviour.

The conformity behaviour of consumers is about the impact on the decision making of consumers due to pressure of group to which they belongs. The groups can be friends, family, society etc. to which they can attach emotionally. When the interaction of the consumers with their respective groups came to online platform through virtual communities, the consumers' decision toward the purchasing has got affected.

The online world has widen the scope for marketers too. Either they shifted their businesses online or they used the platform for promoting their brand to grab the opportunies for strongly positioning their brand in the mind of customers. In this context, the conformity behaviour of consumers emerged as a major problem for the marketers to position their brands in the mind of consumers. Consumers found the comments, suggestions and interactions done by other trusted group members. In previous researches, the relationship between Brand Engagement and E-Consumer Conformity is not clearly defined. The marketers are seeking to engage the customers with the brands in which they deal with. Researcher found that there is lack of defining the relationship between Brand Engagement and E-Consumer Conformity as a gap in literature. Through this study, researcher will add the important points to bridge this gap.

LITERATURE REVIEW SYNTHESIZED MATRIX

S. No.	Author	Normative Conformity	Involvement	Self Esteem	Motivation	Informational Conformity	Sense of Belongingness	Trustworthiness	Community Expertise	Community Engagement	Brand
1	Ahmed et. al., (2013)	√									
2	Alvaro and Crano, (1997)	√				√					
3	Avnet and Higgins 2006a/b										√
4	Bearden, et. al., (1989)	√		√	√	√					
5	Bousch *et. al.* (1993)					√		√			
6	Bowden, (2009)		√					√			√
7	Burnkrant and Cousineau (1975)	√	√		√	√			√		
8	Chatterjee, P. et al., (2017)	√	√				√				
9	Chen et. al. (2013)		√		√		√				√
10	Cheung and Lee, (2009)		√		√		√	√			
11	Chu & Kim, (2011)	√			√			√			√
12	Feick and Price, (1987)		√			√			√		
13	Glasshouwer et. al. (2013)			√							
14	Gonzales and Hancock (2011)			√							
15	Higgins and Scholar, (2009)	√			√	√					√
16	Hollebeek (2011)				√		√	√			√
17	Jaura and Michailova (2014)				√		√				
18	Jin and Kang (2011)	√				√					
19	Khandelwal *et. al.* (2018)	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√		
20	Khare *et. al.*, (2011)	√		√	√	√	√				
21	Kim et. al. (2001)		√				√	√			
22	Kropp et. al. (2005)	√		√		√	√				
23	Laroche *et. al.* (2012)				√	√	√	√			
24	Lascu and Zinkhan (1999)	√		√				√	√		
25	Litvin *et. al.* (2008)		√			√		√	√		
26	Mandhachitara and Piamphongsant, 2008	√			√	√					
27	Muniz and O' Guinn (2001)		√			√					√

28	Ong (2012)		√			√	√	√		
29	Pantelidis (2010)						√	√	√	
30	Park and Cho, (2012)	√	√		√	√	√			
31	Park and Feinberg, (2010)	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	
32	Son (2013)	√								√
33	Tsao (2015)	√				√				
34	Tussyadiah *et. al.*,(2015)	√				√		√		√
35	van Tuijl *et. al.* (2014)		√							

SECTION 3

3.1 Need of Study

Internet has globalized the Indian society which results increase in the interaction of Indian consumers with global consumers and brands through various available platforms. Indian Consumers show the conformity behaviour while taking shopping decisions. With over 460 million Internet users, India is the second largest market after china over the Internet. This era of networking over the globe makes the consumers open to take their decisions by analysing and studying the list of available enormous options. But still decision making of Indian Consumers is passed through the group to which they belong or the group to which they want to relate themselves. They aim the selection on the basis of choice of the groups to which they belong.

The virtual communities available on the Internet are using by consumers to share, search and communicate their belongings, information and thoughts respectively with each other. Consumers are highly influenced by conformity behaviour during communicating with each other on these virtual communities. Virtual communities act as a platform where customers attach emotionally and show the connections and belongingness with social networks. In order to cash in this opportunity, Companies have started to attract the consumers through the virtual platforms. They are using internet to communicate

with their customers by creating the WebPages, forming the groups, advertising over the Internet. The companies are using this platform as a tool for engaging their customers.

The ultimate aim of a company in the competitive era is to get the competitive advantage from other players of the market. Marketing is not only about manufacturing, developing, selling and delivering good quality products or services but also increasingly more concerned with the development of emotional connection between customer and brand products (Šonková & Grabowska, 2015). Companies use different strategies to attract and keep the customers to attach them toward their products or services to get ahead of others. Engaging the customers with the products or services gives the loyalty of customer to a company. Once customer is emotionally connected, he will become advocate of the brand. Engaged customers are more loyal towards the brand. Brand engagement is playing important role for companies to communicate with consumers.

There are many studies on conformity by various researchers where they show how this conformity gets influence from and influencing the norms of customers as well as information seeking behaviour of different consumers. The conformity behavior studied in different disciplines to know the impact of different defined or undefinied norms of others present in environment on an individual. The researcher of marketing discipline has also seen that the consumer behavior is influencing due to conformity behaviour among groups.

E-Consumer conformity emerged as a natal concept in the field of marketing. It is attracting the mind of firms as a possible critical player to affect the engagement of the consumers towards the firms' brands. Marketers cannot compete in a volatile market merely by creating better quality product or reducing costs but whole set of market strategies is required to engage consumers. These strategies can be designed by the marketers by understanding the behaviour of consumers of their brands in the market. The number of efforts is used by marketers to hold their customers by engaging with the products in which the firms deal with. Researcher found that Consumer Conformity over the virtual communities among the consumers is

changing the behaviour of the consumers regarding the engagement with the brand of companies to which they are concerned due to online virtual platform.

So the gap found in the literature can be addressed through the results and conclusions of this research which will be carried by researcher regarding the impact of e-Consumer Conformity on Brand Engagement. This research is required because there are many studies on conformity have been carried by different disciplines but conformity on the virtual platform still require a valuable focus of researchers. In Indian Context, Brand Engagement also has many concerned studies but there is still gap in the explanation of relationship between e-Consumer Conformity and Brand Engagement. Researcher will suggest some factors for Brand Engagement on the basis of consumer conformity over the virtual communities. In order to carry the research, apparel market has been selected by researcher. In Indian context, the apparel market is second largest contributor in GDP after agriculture. The consumers of India are highly conscious about the outfit that they carry. The conformity behaviour is seen highly among them for their apparels, they are highly conscious for their looks. Consumers want to fit in the group to which they desire to belong and to fulfil this desire they are attracted toward the branded apparels which are acceptance range of the society.

The research gap raises these research questions which will be answer though this research:

1. What does the E-Consumer Conformity really mean to consumers in Apparel Sector of India?
2. What are the factors of consumer conformity that affect Brand engagement of Apparel consumers of India?
3. What is the impact of E-Consumer Conformity on Brand Engagement in Apparel sector of India?
4. What is the effect of moderators on the relationship between E-Consumer Conformity and Brand Engagement in Apparel sector of India?

3.2 Objectives

In the light of above research questions, the objectives of the present study are:

- To organize and analyse theoretical construct of E-Consumer conformity influencing the brand engagement.
- To identify antecedents affecting the Brand Engagement with respect to Conformity behaviour of Consumers over the virtual communities.
- To assess the impact of E-Consumer Conformity on the Brand engagement.
- To identify the moderating effect of demographics on the relationship between E-Consumer Conformity and Brand Engagement.

3.3 Conceptual framework and Hypotheses

3.3.1 Hypotheses

In most of the previous studies, the social influence of consumer conformity has being studied into two parts; viz. normative consumer conformity and informative consumer conformity (Park & Feinberg, 2010, Bearden, 1989, Deutsch and Gerard, 1955). Normative consumer conformity is a concern with behavioral conformation in accordance with the perceived expectations of other consumers of the group. Informational consumer conformity is conformance with purchase beliefs and decisions of other group members because of information received from them in the form of their knowledge and expertise. (Park & Feinberg, 2010). Lord *et. al.* (2001) has promoted the supremacy of informative conformity over the normative conformity. Normative Consumer conformity is influenced by internal characteristics while Informational consumer conformity is influenced by external characteristics. The hypothesis for the study drawn based on the facts as revealed in previous literatures.

3.3.1.1 Normative Consumer Conformity and Brand Engagement

In the determination of conformity, Customer Involvement plays a very important role. The different level and intensity of consumer interest with respect to the corresponding products or services is referred as consumer involvement (Krugman, 1965). High involvement means high risk in decision making and has

been found to increase conformity (Grossman and Wisenblit, 1999; Witt and Bruce, 1970). Various discussions on peer to peer virtual community managers encourage members' participation through reward mechanisms in order to enhance members' involvement and re-patronage (Chen *et al.*, 2013).

H_1: There is a significant relationship between consumer involvement and normative consumer conformity

Self-esteem is one of the psychological conditions found to determine susceptibility to conformity influence: a person with low self-esteem shows conformance more than a person to high self-esteem (Park & Feinberg, 2010). Williams, (1979) explained esteem as a thing to prize; to set a high mental valuation upon it; when applied to person his esteem carries interest of approval, affection and affability. Therefore, there is negative relationship between self-esteem and conformity.

H_2: There is a significant relationship between Self Esteem and Normative Consumer Conformity

Motivation and group norms drive the purchase decision of products or services and affect the conformity to group norms. General tendency of consumer to flow with referent groups is influence of consumer motivation towards engagement of customers with products or services which are followed by groups according to trend (Park & Feinberg, 2010). The customers with low conformity motivation (role relaxed consumers) are affected adversely by community conformity and they prefer self-respect as first priority (Mandhachitara, 2008). Hence, higher motivation to conform to a group leads to higher normative conformity.

H_3: There is a significant relationship between Conformity motivation and Normative Consumer Conformity

In this era of virtual communities, consumer shows conformity due to interpersonal interaction on a large scale due to normative concerns to conformity globally and their perceived values of consumption for symbolizing the social status (Tussyadiah, Kausar, & Soesilo, 2015). Companies' desire to gain face and

the fear of losing face directly effects on consumers' need of uniqueness, with the mediation of independent self-construal and consumer's susceptibility to normative influence (Geng *et al.*, 2019). It results into the engaging the consumers with concerned products and services as the part of interactions over the virtual communities due to normative conformity of the customers. Hence, larger normative conformity results into greater level of Brand engagement.

H_4: There is a significant relationship between Normative Consumer Conformity and Brand Engagement

3.3.1.1.1 Moderating effect of demographics on the relationship between Normative Consumer Conformity and Brand Engagement

H_{4a}: There is a significant moderating effect of age on the relationship between Normative Consumer Conformity and Brand Engagement

H_{4b}: There is a significant moderating effect of gender on the relationship between Normative Consumer Conformity and Brand Engagement

H_{4c}: There is a significant moderating effect of income on the relationship between Normative Consumer Conformity and Brand Engagement

H_{4d}: There is a significant moderating effect of marital status on the relationship between Normative Consumer Conformity and Brand Engagement

H_{4e}: There is a significant moderating effect of Education on the relationship between Normative Consumer Conformity and Brand Engagement

H_{4f}: There is a significant moderating effect of Occupation on the relationship between Normative Consumer Conformity and Brand Engagement

3.3.1.2. Informational Consumer Conformity and Brand Engagement

Sense of belongingness occurs in groups form under virtual communities when the people start interacting with each other and socialization among members start increasing (Jaura, 2014). This increase of interaction and socialization carries sense of belongingness which results into group conformance.

H_5: There is a significant relationship between Sense of Belongingness and Informational Consumer Conformity

Consumers tend to rely more on information provided by other consumers rather than companies' persuasive message for their purchase decisions (Litvin et al., 2008; Ong, 2012; Pantelidis, 2010) and consumers have more trust over this information rather than given by marketers (Feick, 1987). Trust allows the free flow of information and Consumer relationships are no exception. A study done by Boush *et. al.,* 1993 shows a positive relationship between Informational Conformity and Trustworthiness.

H_6: There is a significant relationship between Trustworthiness and Informational Consumer Conformity

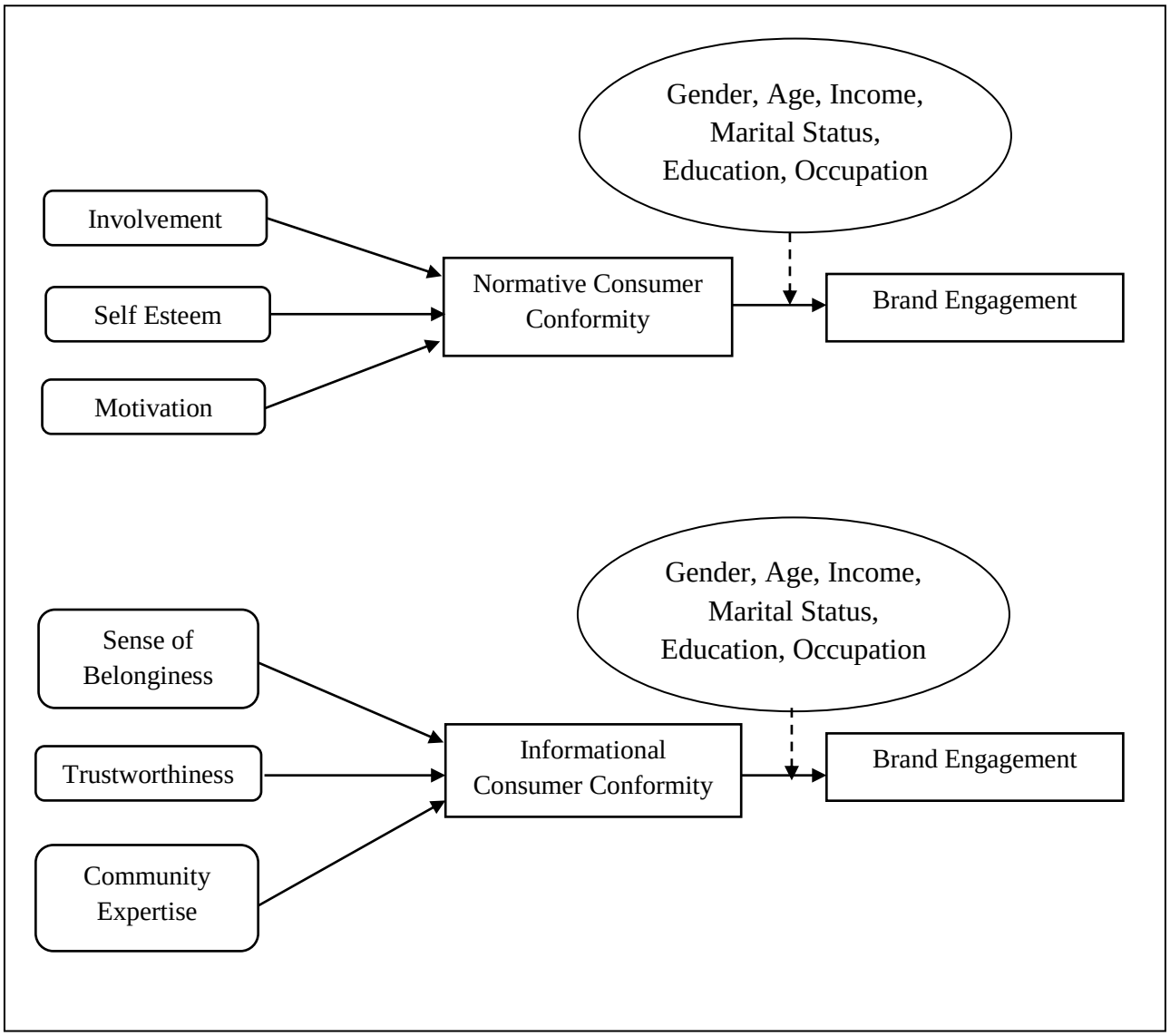
Virtual communities having more expertise consumers are easily comply with social norms of group members (Burnkrant, 1975). Knowledge and expertise of customers is responsible for conformance of the purchase beliefs and decision due to Informational Consumer Conformity (Park & Finberg, 2010).When an individual perceives that virtual community with adequate level of expertise will likely comply with group norms and behave accordingly. An individual with inadequate expertise will not follow with norms. Informative Consumer Conformity represents external virtual community characteristics. Consumer shows conformance of informative behavior to be accurate and correct in their own purchase decisions instead of fit in. (Park & Feinberg, 2010).

H_8: There is a significant relationship between Informative Conformity and Brand Engagement

3.3.1.2.1 Moderating effect of demographics on the relationship between Informational Consumer Conformity and Brand Engagement

H_{8a}: There is a significant moderating effect of age on the relationship between Informational Consumer Conformity and Brand Engagement

Figure 2: Conceptual Framework



Source: ***Author's Compilation***

H_{8b}: There is a significant moderating effect of gender on the relationship between Informational Consumer Conformity and Brand Engagement

H_{8c}: There is a significant moderating effect of income on the relationship between Informational Consumer Conformity and Brand Engagement

H_{8d}: There is a significant moderating effect of marital status on the relationship between Informational Consumer Conformity and Brand Engagement

H_{8e}: There is a significant moderating effect of Education on the relationship between Informational Consumer Conformity and Brand Engagement

H_{8f}: There is a significant moderating effect of Occupation on the relationship between Informational Consumer Conformity and Brand Engagement

SECTION 4

Overview of Proposed Research

4.1 Scope of Study

The scope of Study will be bounded to Apparel Consumers of Agra City and New Delhi involve in online interactions on virtual communities like facebook, whatsapp, blogs, twitter etc. The reason for choosing this geographical area is because these are two major cities of northern India where the people are highly conscious towards their cloths and appearance that they portrait in front of the people at society at large. Metro and Tier 1 cities comprise 70% of Indian Apparel sector consumers nationally. So the engagement of customers towards different brand of apparel seems high in these areas and interaction of these customers directs towards the presence of conformity behaviour among the customers in this era of information technology where every requirement of apparel consumers is now just one click away. So due to homogenous consumers of this geographical region, the collected data will give conscious and efficient results for the results required under this research.

The apparel sector has immense potential to drive economic growth, increase employment, and empower women in India. Apparel market is second largest contributor in retails of India after Agriculture sector. The major shift in consumer preferences is responsible for fastest growth in Indian economy. India has the world's largest youth population, which is becoming fashion conscious owing to mass media and

social media penetration. With a GDP growth rate of 7 percent, India has an edge over developed markets of the US, Europe and Japan which are expected to grow at a rate of 2-3 percent. (IMAGE Business of Fashion, 2017). In June 2016, the Cabinet announced a Rs. 6,000 crore package for the apparel sector (Economic Survevy of India, 2018).

The global apparel markets earned the revenue to the amounts of US$1,487,536 million in 2019. The market is expected to grow annually by 4.0% (CAGR 2019-2023). In global comparison, most of the revenue is generated in United States (US$346,427m in 2019). India stands as the third largest market of Apparels after USA and China (US$113,516m in 2019) (www.statista.com). Recently, China's share of global apparel exports has come down in recent years.

The Indian apparel market can be broadly classified into men's wear, women's wear and kids-wear. Currently, men's wear holds major share in the apparel market. It accounts for 41 per cent of the total market. Women's wear contributes almost 38 per cent, while kids-wear contributes 21 per cent of the market. Both, men's wear and women's wear is expected to contribute 39 per cent each to the total market in 2026, with kids-wear accounting for the rest 22 per cent. (IMAGE Business of Fashion, 2017).

The urban market that mainly comprises of metro cities such as Delhi/ NCR, Mumbai, Bengaluru, Chennai, etc., are the biggest markets for apparel in India and contribute 23 percent to the Indian apparel market. Considering the fact that almost 70 percent of the population resides in villages, the major contribution of urban cities to the apparel market indicates the higher purchasing power of the people in urban cities, their frequency of purchases and tendency to purchase premium and quality products. The metro cities house almost all the big national and international brands, driven by the well informed and employed population. But lately, many global brands have started penetrating into Tier -I and -II cities, while domestic brands are also strengthening their position in these markets. (IMAGE Business of Fashion, 2017).

E-commerce has grown in recent years and has touched every person's life. In India, e-commerce portals and marketplaces have established themselves by providing huge discounts to lure customers thus changing the consumers' mindset and providing wider range of products to choose from. According to Technopak Analysis, currently there are 431 million Internet users which are expected to reach 750 million by 2026. (IMAGE Business of Fashion, 2017).

4.2 Instruments

4.2.1 Primary Data

The tools used for the purpose of primary data collection will be Questionnaires. Structured Questionnaire will be administered in order to collect data from the respondents. The Questionnaire will be distributed offline as well as online to the consumers of products of Apparel Retail.

4.2.2 Secondary Data

Data will be collected through various magazines, newspapers, internet and libraries. The already available researches related to the fields of Brand Engagement and e-Consumer Conformity will be used to design the questionnaires for primary data collection.

4.3 Statistical Tools

To test the proposed relationships, data will be analysed using statistical tools like descriptive statistics, Correlation Analysis, ANOVA (Analysis of Variance), Regression Analysis; SEM (Structural Equation Modeling) etc.

4.4 Sampling

4.4.1 Sample composition

The information of the study will be collected from a systematic data collection by distributing structured questionnaire through online and offline mediums. Data will be collected from the customers of Apparels and are the participants of groups of virtual communities from Agra City and New Delhi.

4.4.2 Sampling Techniques

Purposive sampling, Snowball Sampling and judgmental sampling technique will be used to draw representative samples from the population for the study.

4.4.3 Sample Size

The population from which sample is to be drawn is finite in nature. For calculation of sample size of finite population, first of all, sample size, is to be calculated without considering finite population correction factor. Taking a statistical approach for calculation of sample size, the various quantitative measures to be considered while determining the sample size are as follows:

a) Variability of population characteristics or standard deviation (σ)
b) Level of confidence desired or Z value (taken as 1.96 for 95% confidence level desired)
c) Degree of precision desired in estimating population characteristics (D)

To calculate the sample size without considering finite population correction factor, the following formula is used:

$$\mathbf{n = \sigma^2 . Z^2/D^2}$$

Here, n = sample size

σ = Standard deviation

Z = Standard normal variation for 95% confidence level

D = Degree of precision desired

Scenario 1- Estimating a low standard deviation and high degree of precision.

Scenario 2- Estimating a moderate standard deviation and moderate degree of precision.

Scenario 3- Estimating a high standard deviation and low degree of precision.

In order to obtain a representative and realistic sample size we have compared the results of sample size from 3 scenarios (Israel, 1992):

	SD	Z	D	n_0
Scenario 1	0.25	1.96	0.1	24.01
Scenario 2	0.5	1.96	0.08	150.06
Scenario 3	0.75	1.96	0.05	864.36
Total				1038.46
Average				346

Hence, this formula gives the sample size of 346 respondents.

SECTION 5

CHAPTERIZATION

The structure of proposed research will be as follows:

Chapter 1: Introduction

Chapter 2: Review of Literature

Chapter 3: Research Methodology

Chapter 4: Analysis and Results

Chapter 5: Conclusions and Directions for Future Research

SECTION 6

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